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Convention versus deviance: moral agency in adolescent gang members' decision making

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Abstract

Background—Adolescent gang members are a source of concern due to their involvement in criminal activity, violence, substance use and high-risk sexual behaviors. Adolescent gang theories hypothesize that social institutions, including the family and school, fail to meet the needs of adolescents who therefore feel less attachment to these institutions and find an unconventional institution (i.e. the gang) to meet these needs through the gang.

Objectives—In this paper we will examine the extent to which social disorganization and social control theories, in particular the rejection of conventional norms and aspirations, match adolescents subjective reasons for their decisions and their future aspirations.

Methods—Between 2012 and 2013, we conducted in-depth interviews with 58 gang members between the ages of 14 to 19. Interviews were coded for key themes using the constant comparison method.

Results—Social disorganization and social control theories have both value and limitations in explaining reasons why adolescents join gangs and engage in criminal behaviors. Participants saw many of their aspirations blocked by negative school experiences and limited economic opportunities. Gangs provided a social organization in which to sell drugs. However, gang members did not reject conventional norms and aspirations. Rather, they view themselves as making decisions to survive in the present while recognizing that these strategies will not continue

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to work in the future. Conclusions: Gang members value education and aspire to obtain legal employment. Thus, interventions to help adolescent gang members with the immediate financial pressures that lead them to sell drugs may be particularly effective.

Adolescent gang members are a source of concern for researchers and communities in the United States and globally. Gang members are disproportionately involved in perpetrating violent crime, including sales of illegal drugs (Esbensen, Peterson, Freng, & Taylor, 2002; Klein, 2006; Taylor, Peterson, Esbensen, & Freng, 2007). Gang members, however, are also at increased risk of being victims of violence. It has been estimated that gang members die by homicide at a rate that is 100 times higher than the national average (Pyrooz, Fox, Katz, & Decker, 2012). In addition, gang members have higher rates of other health risk behaviors, such as early and risky sexual behavior and substance use. In a study of 270 detained adolescents, adolescents who reported having been in a gang were 5.7 times more likely to have had sex, 3.2 times more likely to have gotten a girl pregnant, and almost 4 times more likely to have had sex while high on alcohol or drugs than adolescents who were not members of a gang (Voisin et al., 2008). Adolescent gang members are also at highest risk for using and abusing drugs and alcohol and participating in delinquent activities when compared with other high risk groups of adolescents who are not gang members (Esbensen et al., 2002; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2004).

In spite of these risks, few interventions have been developed for active gang members (Miller, Boyer, & Cotton, 2004). To be effective, interventions should focus on the reasons they join gangs and engage in risky behaviors. To date, much research has focused on personal factors including antisocial beliefs or personalities, impulsivity and environmental risks including inadequate schools, violent and impoverished neighborhoods, and poor parental monitoring (Kerig, Wainryb, Twali, & Chaplo, 2013; Wood & Alleyne, 2010). While such factors are clearly associated with joining a gang, they fail to explain why some adolescents with poor impulse control and from poor neighborhoods decide to join a gang while others do not. This literature also fails to explore the reasons for and methods adolescents leave gangs, questions at least as important in designing interventions (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011).

Sociological theories regarding gang formation try to explain why adolescent gangs develop and persist in particular neighborhoods rather than focusing on individual-level risk factors. However, many follow a deficit model in that gangs both fill roles that conventional institutions such as school and family are unable to fulfill and, at the same time, offer alternative and deviant social norms to its members. One of the earliest theories on the reason gangs form, and arguably still one of the most influential, is *social disorganization*. In attempting to explain why adolescent boys joined gangs in Chicago, Thrasher (Thrasher, 1927) theorized that economic destabilization contributed to social disorganization which, in turn, led to the breakdown of conventional institutions such as the school, the church and the family. This erosion of conventional establishments meant that they were unable to meet the needs of the people and eventually became unable to control the behavior of residents in these communities. Following this theoretical tradition, Vigil (Vigil, 2002) argues that gang membership is the outcome of *multiple marginalizations* of particular groups. Multiple marginalization refers to historical and structural forces that result in the economic

insecurity of and lack of employment opportunities for segments of the population, fragmented institutions of social control, poverty, and inadequate living conditions within particular neighborhoods, and family and community stress and disintegration. However, multiple marginalizations also recognizes the advantages of gang membership, including a sense of belonging. Social control theory (Agnew, 1992) hypothesizes that adolescents join gangs because of the absence of key relationships including those that impose formal sanctions (criminal justice system) and informal sanctions including social norms internalized through adequate socialization. In all three theories, social institutions, including the family and school, fail to adequately meet the needs of adolescents who therefore feel less attachment to these institutions and find an unconventional institution to meet these needs through the gang.

Other theorists have focused on “subcultural” explanations of gang membership. Shaw and McCay (Shaw & McKay, 1942) argue that socially disorganized neighborhoods culturally transmit criminal traditions from generation to generation in gangs. Similarly, in “differential associations,” (Sutherland, 1937; Sutherland & Cressey, 1960) young people develop the attitudes and skills to become delinquent by becoming associated with “carriers” of criminal conditions. Still other theorists have explained gang membership and criminality in general by focusing on the emotional reactions of people who are frustrated in achieving a set of universal goals set by society (Agnew, 2001; Felson, Osgood, Horney, & Wiernik, 2012). Central to this is *strain theory* that posits strain is the emotional consequence of the inability of adolescents to obtain the goals and status they wish.

More recent research has focused on the way in which black and Latino youth are criminalized in their everyday lives including constant surveillance and being stopped by police on the street, as well as in inner-city schools where police presence is ubiquitous and often used to reinforce disciplinary actions for students (Rios, 2011). According to Rios, black and Latino youth are treated as deviant long before they commit any crimes and that engaging in some crime becomes a form of resistance to this constant surveillance.

All of the theories summarized briefly here assume that gang members reject conventional goals and aspirations, either because these opportunities are blocked, because they learn alternate subcultural values or because they are treated as deviant and criminal from a young age. Yet, little evidence suggests that gang members would not choose to live a more conventional lifestyle if they were able to earn as much in the legitimate labor marketplace as in criminal activities (Bourgois, 1995). In fact, little research explores gang members’ decision making processes regarding joining a gang or the activities they engage in as gang members. The implications of these theories make intervention for gang members daunting, as they must tackle social context, economic forces, school reform, family interventions and psychotherapy. In fact, few interventions for active gang members exist (Knox & Tomanhauser, 1999). More interventions have been developed to prevent children and adolescents from joining gangs, and some intervene at multiple levels including the school and family (Farrington & Welsh, 2007). Interventionists seem to believe that once an adolescent joins a gang, law enforcement suppression strategies are the best option (Howell, 2010). However, research that has actually examined patterns of gang desistance has found that members leave their gangs for both “push”, i.e. wanting to avoid the violence associated

with gangs, and “pull” motives, i.e. getting a job, having children and that the majority were able to leave their gangs without violent consequences, especially those that left for pull motives (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Pyrooz’ literature is also one of the few studies that examine joining and leaving gangs as active decisions made by adolescents.

This paper will address a critical gap in both sociological and psychological theories of gang membership in that in both schools of thought, gang members are rarely considered as making active choices about their lives. We analyze data from in-depth interviews with 58 active gang members between the ages of 14 to 19 to explore the gang members’ decisions to join a gang and the decisions they engage in as an active gang member. In particular, we will examine gang members’ reasoning regarding typical “deviant” activities associated with being a gang member including school dropout, drug selling and use and violence and show that their choices are often considered the most rational and moral choices that gang members can make in the present, although their current actions may not match their long-term aspirations and goals. We also examine the extent to which social disorganization and social control theories, in particular the rejection of conventional norms and aspirations, match adolescents’ own explanations for the context of their decisions. Finally, we will explore the implications of gang members’ explanations of the decisions they make for interventions designed to reduce the risks and improve the lives of adolescents who have already joined a gang.

Methods

Sampling and data collection

Between June 2012 and July 2013, we conducted 58 semi-structured interviews with current members of six adolescent African American and Latino gangs. Gangs were purposively selected in advance to reflect the different sizes and ethnic diversity of gangs in the city. One primarily African American gang and one primarily Latino gang were larger gangs with national representation, while the other gangs were local community or neighborhood gangs. Inclusion criteria were active membership in one of the six identified gangs, being 14 to 19 years old, and the ability to provide informed consent. Participants were recruited via a combination of targeted direct sampling methods with outreach from research assistants and referral of contacts by study participants. Upon completion of the interview, participants received two referral cards to recruit additional gang members into the study. Participants received a \$30 cash incentive for participating and an additional \$10 incentive for referring additional eligible participants. All participants completed written informed consent prior to screening given the sensitivity of the screening questions. We received a waiver of parental consent for minors under the age of 18 given that some parents may be unaware of their children’s gang involvement.

Interviews were conducted in English, digitally recorded, and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews took place in a variety of community-based settings that were comfortable and accessible to participants, including community organizations and churches. All interviews were conducted by two research assistants who both had extensive histories working with gang involved youth and were trained in qualitative interviewing methods, an African American woman and a Latino man; all interviews with female members were conducted by

the female research assistant given the content and sensitivity of many of the interview questions. Interviews covered participants' history of gang involvement (including when and why they joined the gang, how they were initiated, and their current gang activities), and current drug and alcohol use. Informed consent and project protocols were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and then transferred to the qualitative data management software program MAXQDA to be coded collaboratively by three members of the research team. We coded all transcripts by gender, ethnicity, and gang, to allow for the exploration of differences among gangs or across gender and ethnicity of gang members. We examined transcripts to identify primary coding categories and themes. An initial codebook was created to capture broad content areas and key analytical concepts evident across interviews, including gang structure and norms, gang activities, school experiences, family, and drug and alcohol use. The codebook was created collaboratively with input from the PI, the research team, and the research assistants. Codes were refined using an iterative process throughout the analysis. All coding occurred collaboratively, with at least two members coding the same interview and discussing discrepancies in coding until consensus was reached either by refining the coding tree or definitions.

We explored the differences and similarities within and between male and female gang members, c smaller and larger gangs, and African American and Hispanic gangs across the larger themes. For example, we compared differences in how female gang members responded to questions concerning reasons for joining a gang, drug selling activities, family life, violence and substance use with how male gang members responded. If a pattern of differences was seen, this was checked by looking at themes and seeing if there were systematic differences based on gender. These comparisons were repeated for Latino versus African American gang members, and larger and smaller gangs. In general, few systematic differences were seen based on race/ethnicity or size of gangs, although some gender differences were found in participation in drug selling and noted in results. The final phase of analysis consisted of summarizing major themes related to the decisions adolescents made before and while they were in a gang, looking for salient themes, as well as outliers and contradictions to protect against overgeneralizations. Emblematic quotes were selected to represent ideas, thoughts, or experiences consistent across interviews, or to highlight differing or contradictory experiences, thoughts, or attitudes. In this paper, most signifies that over 70% of the participants expressed the experience or attitude, the majority that over 50% expressed the theme, some that more than 30% expressed the theme, and a few that under 30% expressed the theme. Potential biases of the authors include a harm reduction philosophy to substance use and sexual risk, being parents of adolescents and viewing gangs as a vulnerable population in need of intervention. These were addressed by carefully noting the frequency in which themes were discussed and critical discussions regarding we were presenting gang members in an overly sympathetic manner, or conversely, in a way that sensationalized their risk behaviors.

Results

School dropout and joining gangs: The social disorganization of schools

Similar to social strain theory and social disorganization, many participants cited problems with school as a reason that they joined gangs. The majority of participants (55%) reported having dropped out of school, some on the first day of school. Most of the others who had not yet dropped out and so were still technically enrolled in school reported missing a number of days as they were more attracted to the “street life.” Only 10 out of the 58 had reported graduating from high school. Most explained that “fast money” and the excitement of street life was more interesting and attractive to them than school. They often didn’t see any immediate benefit to attending school as the participant below reports. For most, school could not provide the immediate economic benefits (made necessary because of social disorganization) that being a member of a gang and selling drugs offered.

Interviewer: What is your experience of school?

Participant (Male, Latino, 19): I dropped out in 9th grade. Just wasn’t me.

I: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

A: Well, ah, I got caught into like the fast life—like drugs and gangs and money, especially money. I figure I could get more money than I would be getting in school...Like, I mean, it’s hard out here, you know. I came from not a wealthy family so I felt that I had to get money so I can provide for myself and do what I gotta do.

While economic motivations were not the only reasons participants joined a gang—other common reasons reported being the feeling of family and belonging that gangs provided—making money was one reason mentioned by the majority of participants. Without a high school diploma, participants recognized that they were unlikely to get anything other than a minimum wage job, if that. Drug selling offered one of the few economic alternatives. Further, the attraction of money from drug selling for most gang members was not so that they would be able to buy cars, clothes and other “flashy” things. As the participant above mentions, earning money for most gang members participating in the study was a question of survival. In many of these cases, parents were not able to provide basic necessities for the family due to substance use, parental separations, parental incarcerations or lack of employment.

Interviewer: So what is your current living situation?

Participant (Male, Latino, 18 years old): I live with my mom.... [My parents] got divorced a few years ago.

I: Okay. And how did that affect you?

A: Well, it was tough. I mean, you know, it just makes you realize you got to be there for your mom more than anything else, you know.

I: Okay. And is there anybody else that lives there? Do you have any brothers or sisters?

A: Yeah. I have a younger brother and a younger sister.

I: Okay. And how is your relationship with them.

A: Good. I mean, you know, I kind of took on the father figure when my dad left. So, you know, it's a good relationship though. You know, I try to make sure they stay out of trouble, go to school and all that stuff.... You know, I got to make sure to help out around the house, help out with bring money into the house, you know, paying the bills and stuff...

I Okay. Is there anyone else in your family that is in a gang besides you?

A: No. No. I mean, my brother, he's, you know, he's thirteen. Uh, my sister's too young. You can tell that he kinda wants to hang out and do the things, you know, like when I'm hanging out with my guys and stuff, but I'm trying to push him away from that.

Rather than rejecting conventional attitudes (a tenant of the social disorganization/social control theories), the participant above feels that he has taken on the "traditional" role of father figure by not only providing economically for his family, but making sure his siblings attend school and stay away from gangs. He recognizes that selling drugs and belonging to a gang is not a legitimate way to fulfill these roles, but it was the option available to him at his young age. He does not romanticize a criminal lifestyle and works to keep his siblings from that lifestyle. While he expressed that his brother was "too young" at 13 to join a gang, he himself had joined a gang at the age of 12. He felt he needed to leave school for the benefit of his larger family.

Social disorganization is clear in participants' descriptions of the failure of schools to meet their needs. For many participants, the decision to leave school was made easier as the possibilities of them graduating seemed more remote. Of participants who were still in school, all but two described missing almost half their days and all but one had poor or failing grades. Thus, many still in school did not have enough credits to graduate on time. While these school experiences may seem particularly dire, it must be put into the context of Milwaukee Public Schools in which the most recent graduation estimate is 61% (Richards, 2014). Many gang members also reported being suspended or expelled for fighting or carrying drugs. Few participants returned to school after their suspension or expulsion period as there were few adults who worked to get them into alternative schools, or to force them to re-enroll. Still others probably had unaddressed learning disorders. Recent reports estimate the rate of students with disabilities in MPS to be 20%. The graduation rate for students with disabilities was 15.9% in 2013 (Richards, 2014). The participant below, while he was diagnosed with a learning disability and was placed in a special education class, did not receive enough support to succeed in school. Like many other participants, he also had a forced period of non-attendance, in his case, by being arrested.

Participant (Male, African American, 18 years old): I'm a dropout.... I made it up to high school for about a month, then I dropped out... 'cause I got arrested in school.... I've been out for a year.

I:... When you were in school, tell me, can you tell me what kind of grades you got?

P: I had basically got, it was low grades, so that helped me more to even drop out.... I had a learning disability problem.

I: And how did that make you feel? Did you know, you know?

P: That was a low feeling. I mean you feel like you don't know anything. You feel low, real low.... I mean you had a feeling of not knowing how to do your work and all that, and it's, I don't care. They tease you 'cause they know you're in a learning disability class. Come out, they tease you, throw things at you. You don't care about school man.

Rios has documented how the experience of being arrested in school has become increasingly common in many poor, urban school districts as police are routinely called to take care of what are essentially disciplinary problems (Rios, 2011).

The decision to leave school was also made easier for other gang members who were bullied or faced violence at school. Most participants reported experiencing violence in school including participating in and being victims of fights with other students.

Interviewer: What is your experience with school?

Participant (Male, Latino, 19 years old): I didn't finish.... I wanted to be a gym teacher, to be honest with you. I chose a program that led me to South Division High School, which was the biggest mistake of my life, crossing from the East Side to the South Side, really didn't coincide with my plans.... It's a program called Recreation and Life Time Sports. It's a specialty program that allowed me to do two years of college and become a Physical Ed teacher.

I: Okay. So what happened? What was the mistake of going to do that?

P: What you mean? You never heard of Latin Kings?... I wasn't even, you know what I'm saying, representing or doing nothing like that. It's just one look, recognized me from the other side of town, and I literally got chased out of school.... [I was] Just into my 9th grade year, just in the beginning of the school year, so I didn't even get a chance. And...the guys that were waiting for me were grown ass men. You know what I'm saying? I'm 15 years old and they're chasing me, 37 years old. I'm at school man....

The lack of safety in school made it impossible for this participant to achieve his conventional aspirations. In other words, while institutions failed to meet his needs, consistent with many of the theories above, he did not reject conventional aspirations but was rather blocked from obtaining them. Other potential schools also could not offer safety and so the participant opted for the immediate gains of gang life.

Like the participant above, most participants who dropped out of school recognized the importance of an education, even if they did not appreciate it at the time. Many talked about wanting to go back to school in order to find a more stable and legal source of income, particularly if they had children. Those with children desired to model more conventional

ideas of success by going to school and getting a professional or semi-professional job. They also hoped that their children would go to school and not repeat some of the mistakes that they had made.

Participant (Latina/African American 19): Now that I'm pregnant, it's [school is] very important. I wanna—I kind of realized that I need to start growing up now and take care of my child. I'm having a boy so I don't want him to follow my footsteps. I want him to finish school.

Unfortunately, conventional goals become more difficult to achieve once the adolescent has dropped out of school. Negative experiences at school, poor attendance and academic achievement, and disciplinary actions often led participants to drop out of school. This created a negative feedback circle as once they dropped out, it was more difficult to re-enter and complete high school. In these circumstances, gang life becomes not only the option with the most immediate benefits, but the only realistic option left available.

Gangs as a subculture: Drug Selling Organization

Dropping out of school in order to spend more time selling drugs to meet their own and family members' needs was the most frequent economic activity reported by participants. Gangs offered an organizational structure in which to sell drugs for maximum profit. In other words, consistent with subcultural theories of gang membership, gangs taught and facilitated drug selling for younger members. Most gang members reported selling as a group. The perceived benefits of selling as a unit were multiple, although not all participants reported all reasons. The most frequently cited reason was that selling as a group allowed the gang to buy in bulk in order to maximize the profits. Most gang members will pay into the product and then get a larger percentage of the profit. Most individual gang members would not have the money to buy a large quantity. As one participant said, *"You sell it as a group.... Everybody put in and so, when you've finished... you bring...big packets... and everybody goes and hit they corners. (Male, African American, 19)"*

As another participant from the same gang went on to explain, buying in bulk also allows gang members to help newer members earn some money without putting in money up front. Gang members who do not have money can be put to work "breaking down" marijuana, or separating the more profitable buds of the plant, from leaves and stems. They then get the right to sell some of the product and keep the profits. Thus, selling as a group is consistent with gang moral values of social cohesion in which gang members are expected to take care of each other just as family members would.

The benefits of being in a gang and selling as a group carry certain obligations. Gang members are expected to earn money to contribute to the group. This can be seen as a kind of social insurance with those who do not "pay in" not having the right to benefits. Non-compliance with the obligation to contribute to the gang is often punished.

Participant (Male, African American, 18): It's [drug selling] not freelance. It goes really to our family. Money is to protect our family and for our needs, what we want. So most of the things we really want is material things. [In] case this family

or this person needs something, we got to help them, 'cause he's a family member, she's a family member.

I: So basically you guys pool your money together to buy the drugs and then you split it, or somebody gives you the—Can you explain to me a little bit if you would?

P: Okay. We, we hustle our money to help each other. All the, 'cause just like, there's not one person that's gonna sit back and ain't gonna do nothing. All of us goin' to have to do something and that's where we get our things that we need. Never know what we want.

I: So what happens if you notice that a person's not, per se, pulling their weight?

P: He's got nothing coming. But he's gonna pull his weight.

I: Okay what's—

P: That's a violation too... 'cause you slacking. You're holding us down.

Being “violated” means being punished, usually by withstanding a beating by more than one gang member. Money goes to the gang to pay for things that all members can benefit from, for example rent on the “trap house” where drugs are broken down and packaged and where gang members can sleep, money for members in need, weapons, and bail.

Participant (Male, African American, 17) : We do it [drug selling] as a group. A lot of people freelance, but we do—we mostly do it as a group so we can save money for—'cause if you freelance, you won't make enough money to bail yourself out. If you do it as a group, it'll be easier for someone to come bail you out 'cause you all have been saving the money. More people, more money.

Also consistent with subcultural theories of gang membership, gangs access to skills to avoid police detection and other risks such as competition from other gang members, being robbed or assaulted by drug using clients and police detection and arrest. Participants reported different strategies to avoid these risks and changed them frequently to adapt to changes in the context. Strategies to avoid police detection included using female gang members to move drugs because they are less likely to be stopped and searched by police. Further, male gang members with a record avoided getting arrested and serving longer sentences in this way. Participants also talked about trying to keep a “low profile” in various ways by meeting clients away from the “trap house” or changing locations. Selling to regular clients reduced the risk of being robbed or assaulted.

Moral Values in Economic Decisions/Maintaining Neighborhood Relations

Although drug selling is their main source of income, gang members also reported considerable ambivalence about certain aspects of drug selling, recognizing the harm that it had done to their families and communities. As a result, most gang members mentioned many rules regarding to whom they would and would not sell drugs. A few gang members expressed the recognition that who, ultimately, used their drugs was beyond their control. This lack of ultimate control allowed them to rationalize their drug selling to reduce

cognitive dissonance between drug selling and their self-image as moral people who try to protect their neighborhoods.

Participant (Female, African American, 18): It's [selling drugs] just like a job, you know what I mean? Like I'm not selling it to the kids, you know what I mean? Like everybody who I deal with is a dealer, basically. So I get it and break it up. Who they sell it to I have no, uh—I can't do nothing about that, you know. I just get mine, break it off, and everybody does theirs. I don't really sell to little kids or—I'm not down like that. Even though I'm not grown, grown, but I, you know, I'm not gonna do that.

Norms and rules against selling drugs to children indicate that gang members are not rejecting conventional norms as hypothesized by many theories of gang membership. The ambivalence around selling drugs due to the potential harm it does to others and their communities is also seen in the counterintuitive practice of gang members selling drugs to their own family members. Although only a few gang members reported being in this situation, many more reported seeing other gang members sell to family members. They reasoned that parents were addicted and going to buy drugs anyway and that by selling drugs to them, gang members were able to keep resources within their families.

Participant (Male, Latino, 18): It's hard because, you know, some of these brothers—like my mama never did it, but some of these brothers learned how to get high with their parents. You know, it's like now that's—I'm grateful that I didn't grow up like that, but I see it where some, some of my niggas even sell dope to their father and their mother, you know. Like dang. Like your mother's a hype, your father's a hype. They're buying dope. It's like he's selling them dope, but it, you know what, it's freaky but it's just part of life 'cause what then he's gonna go spend it somewhere else. That's how they look at it, you know. That he's already making his choice by smoking it, and he's like well, you know pops not gonna get a better deal from nobody else, you know. So then he got the dealer who's got a [father] who's on dope, and he's selling to him. And having him go—sending him off on missions to go do stuff. You know what I mean?

A “hype” is someone who is dependent on crack. “Sending him off on missions” refers to the participation of drug users in illegal activities, such as shop lifting, robbing or exchanging sex, in order to earn money to buy drugs. By selling to parents, gang members can also prevent them from getting hurt while performing these sorts of activities.

Selling drugs also allows gang members to take care of children and old people in their neighborhood. The sentiment below was expressed by the majority of participants in one way or another.

Participant (Female, African American, 18): The ice cream truck pull up and all the kids getting ice cream. We go—we buy everybody a Quest card [food stamps] so we take all the kids to the store. We buy Christmas gifts for every kid on the block because most of the crack heads bring their kids' toys [in exchange for drugs] so we already, you know, we give everybody a gift. Like if it's they birthday, we throw them a party if they mama can't afford it. We have block parties.

Norms of reciprocity are common in most economic transactions and do not make rational sense if economic decisions are made only to maximize gain. Gaining the goodwill of neighbors through helping those who are in need makes good economic sense when we consider that neighbors may disrupt gang members drug sales by, for example, calling the police. Some participants claimed that they had good relations with their neighbors as expressed by the participant below.

Participant (Male, African American, 19): Mostly the neighborhood that we live in is like everybody is mostly in the gang but everybody knows us. The people that's not in the gang know how we get down and how we roll. We don't pick fights with people so really they don't feel like the police should be sweating us at all because we do good things besides the other things...sell drugs and the fights and other than that we respect our neighborhood and people really don't like the police because we do respect our neighborhood.

The antipathy that gang members feel toward the police is not due their rejection of the need for law and order to protect their neighborhoods. Rather, gang members felt that police focused on relatively harmless infractions like drug selling but were unavailable or unwilling to perform more essential functions such as protecting neighborhood residents in a timely manner when violence was occurring. As the participant below expresses, this view was shared not only by gang members but by other community residents as well.

Participant (Male, African American, 19): [T]hey feel like the police don't help... Like what purpose is the police? You can call them on a situation, they don't come 'til tomorrow...but if you tell them somebody over there done sold some drugs, or you can raid this house, they over there. But if you call up...like "Hey. There's a situation going on over here. We really need you to get over here," they not coming.

Rios calls this the over-policing, under-policing paradox. Young people of color are singled out for stops and searches, but serious violent crime is often not responded to, perhaps because policing youth is less risky for police (Rios, 2011).

However, while gang members' views of the police are consistent with some parts of social disorganization theory (failure of the institution of the police), gang members do not reject the need for the functions that the police should ideally serve. In the absence of legitimate police authority, gang members took on these functions themselves.

Interviewer: I want to talk a little bit about your neighborhood. Can you tell me what types of things does your gang do within your neighborhood?

Participant (Male, Latino, 19): We protect. We like the police. We protect and we serve.

I: Okay. And what kinds of things do you protect, you know, and serve? Can you tell me?

P: Families, uh, kids. You know, one thing, you know, you got to look out for the kids in the neighborhood 'cause they the future. You got to make sure they okay. And, uh, your fellow gang members' families. You might see a fellow gang member's auntie or uncle, grandpa or someone on the street. You always make sure

they okay. You always make sure ain't nobody messing with them, ain't nobody, you know—everybody knows the family members of the clique 'cause they untouchable.

In Venkatesh's ethnographic study of life in Chicago housing projects, gang members often took an unofficial policing role within the projects, as police were unable and unwilling to respond when violence flared (Venkatesh, 2006).

A few gang members offered no rationalization for their use of violence. In these cases, gang members might be said to be suffering from perpetration induced trauma (Kerig et al., 2013). Post-traumatic stress disorder has been seen among soldiers, police and even convicted murderers whose actions resulted in the death or injury of others. Such actions can cause moral injury when gang members participate in acts that violate their own moral scriptures and that cannot be rationalized as serving the greater good, as some of the participants above describe their actions.

Interviewer: Well, you kind of mentioned, you know, a little bit about...like it [gang banging] taking over. Can you explain to me a little bit about how that happened?

Participant (Male, African American, 17): Like, um, when I say it took over, I mean like completely like it was my life.... Like I live by the rules that the gang taught me when I was young. Like I sold drugs. If I had to do this or shoot somebody or whatever, I had to do it. To the point of feeling bad, I couldn't. You know what I'm saying? I got violated, you know, when I did something wrong. And, you know, if somebody send me off like a OG [Original Gangster, term for an older gang member in a leadership position] or somebody send me off to do something, I do it. You know, I wasn't thinking about other people's lives. I wasn't thinking about other people. I'd rob, take, whatever, do whatever I got to do to survive...With me being a gangbanger, riding with gangs, you know, I had to live defending myself and fighting for a gang, basically, instead of fighting to, you know—I'll fight for a gang more than my life. I let it control me. Like whatever another gang member tells me, I go with it, you know.

Far from being anti-social, most participants framed their actions in a way that they minimized harm and even helped their neighborhoods economically and from outside violence. Those who did not frame their actions that way—like the participant above—expressed considerable regret about their actions.

Proscriptions against Substance Use

While gang members engage in some “deviant” behaviors such as drug selling, they do not engage in deviant behaviors indiscriminately as seen in the decisions they make regarding drug use. Participants almost universally reported smoking marijuana and many reported drinking alcohol. However, almost all agreed that the gang actively prohibited the use of certain drugs or at least strongly frowned upon it. These substances included the drugs that gang members used to earn most of their money, namely cocaine, crack and heroin. One of the reasons commonly reported for not using these substances was that gang members would get addicted to the substances and not make a profit. As one 17 year old African American

girl said “That’s mainly the product that they sell so if you’re smoking it, you’re not making any money.”

Cutting into profits was only part of the reason gang members prohibited crack, cocaine or heroin use, however, as moral values also played an important role. Many, as seen above, had witnessed parents who were addicted to the substances and the harm it did to themselves and their families. Hard drug users were seen as violent, erratic and not to be trusted. As one participant explained,

P: Uh, I grew up on it [crack]. My dad used it and a lot of other gang members use it. I don’t fly that boat, you know what I’m saying. It just leads to ugliness. It’s ugly. It’s too much violence.... That’s—you know what I’m saying, that’s—that was cause of my mom getting hit, you know, all that shit. Getting beat. It’s like, it changes you. You can’t control it, really. So, I’ve seen my people, we’re all in order. You know what I’m saying? We’re all making money and you’re gonna mess it up by smoking some dumb shit like that? You’re gonna have to face the consequences.

I: What would that be?

P: Like fight all three of us at once.

For many participants, crime, in terms of heavy drug use, is not reproduced as would be expected according to subcultural theories. Rather, they learned from the disintegration of family caused by “heavy” drug use.

Marijuana and alcohol, on the other hand, were not seen as addictive or harmful.

Interviewer: Okay, are there any rules in the gang against using certain kinds of drugs, you know, drugs you can or cannot use or alcohol use or something?

Participant (Male, African American, 19): Really, everybody in our gang just smokes marijuana, no crack is being used, heroin. We got a couple drinkers but everybody knows how to control their drinking.

I: And so they’re not allowed to use heroin or crack. Can you tell me why you have those rules in place?

P: Because those drugs—well to everybody in the gang those drugs are way powerful and people—we feel like people can stop smoking weed but when it comes to crack and heroin, that’s very addictive. Weed can be addictive but people can—we know how to control it. Like crack and heroin, you have withdrawal. I’ve been in jail with somebody that had a withdrawal the next door from me so I know how that goes. It can affect people and we all in the gang know how that can affect people.

Only three participants saw smoking marijuana as problematic in their lives.

Future Aspirations

When asked about what programs they would like to see to help gang members or when asked about what they hoped for their futures, most gang members talked about wanting job

training and education. Only one participant responded that she did not think that gangs needed any intervention. Most gang members recognized that they would not be able to sell drugs or be active in gang life in the future, and that continuing such activities would likely lead them to prison or be killed.

Interviewer: So where do you see yourself in five years from now?

Participant (Male, African American, 19): Five years, I see myself getting married, having children, probably own my own business, you know. Raise my kids and be a, be better than me, all the mistakes that I made, make sure he had kids and teach them a lesson too, and they get married, do they own thing. Just basically live a good life.

I: So do you, are, what are you doing right now? Are you working or something?

P: Uh uh. I'm trying to. Like, you know, the jobs gettin' kind of hard. I've been fillin' job applications. I ain't gonna stop 'til I get one, 'til they call me. And now that you can't really, the only way I really can get a job if I go back to school and get my HSD [High School Diploma]. 'Cause like I tried. I've been filled out an application for Aldi's [supermarket] but they changed and said I need my HSD to... get hired. And they ain't gonna give me no application unless I get my HSD....

I: So are you gonna, you know, now you're seeing how important it is, are you going to, so you are planning on going back...this coming August?

P: Uh uh. 'Cause I was supposed to start Job Corps this year too.... I gotta call the lady back. I didn't talk to her in a long, a while, so I'm, I was gonna call her probably today and see if [the] house still got my file and stuff, when... I gave her...all my information just before she [told me]...they keep it too long, you don't show up and call they'll shred it.... So I'm gonna call and check up on that, see if they didn't. I'm gonna call them and see when can I start.

Far from rejecting conventional lifestyles, gang members dreamed of achieving legal employment, having a family and leaving the gang.

Interviewer: What kind of programs would you like to see?

Participant (Male, African American, 17): I would actually like to go to school.... I would like to go to MATC [area Technical College] and be a mechanic so I could get my own shop and stuff like that....

I: If you could accomplish like go to school and stuff, would you leave the gang or how would that work? Can you explain a little bit to me?

P: If I was to go to school and actually accomplish that I would actually lay off from the gang. I really would....

I: And how about have you seen anybody leave the gang?

P: I've seen somebody leave the gang for school.... It's better that you let them know than go and do some fake stuff and stuff like that.

According to many participants, achieving a more conventional lifestyle through legal employment and education is not prohibited by the gang. Rather, many see such aspirations as consistent with many of the values and norms held by their gang. The gang functions not to tie its members to criminal lifestyles, but offers alternative economic opportunities through criminal behavior for those who need it.

Discussion

Results of this paper show both the explanatory value and the limitations of social disorganization, subcultural theory and strain theory in explaining reasons why adolescents join gangs and engage in criminal behaviors. Certainly there is a great deal of social disorganization in their neighborhoods. Our participants also viewed many of their aspirations blocked by negative school experiences, school failure and limited economic opportunities as suggested by strain theory. Also, consistent with subcultural theory, gangs provided a social organization in which to learn how to sell drugs and obtain the resources to make money doing so. However, gang members also make decisions based on their own moral codes. Further, our results provide little evidence that gang members reject conventional norms and aspirations. Rather, they view themselves as making decisions to survive in the present while recognizing that these strategies are not likely to continue working in the future. Most dreamed of one day obtaining legal employment and raising their own children to avoid gang life.

Our results show that the decision to join gangs was in part due to the immediate financial pressures faced by gang members. The short term gains of drug selling were valued over longer term goals such as finishing school. This decision was made in a context of social disorganization. The majority of participants described families that were disrupted or dissolved due to divorce, parental substance use and incarceration. They therefore felt responsible to earn money to support themselves and other members of their families. Strain theory has some merit in explaining the decision to leave school as well. Gang members had many negative experiences in school including bullying, being expelled and poor academic performance which made successfully completing school seem like a remote possibility. However, in general, gang members still valued education and hoped to return to complete their schooling. Unfortunately, the decision to stop attending school further limited options to make different decisions in the future. Adolescent gang members who skipped school to spend more time on the streets to sell drugs often came to the realization that completing high school on time was a remote possibility. Without a high school diploma, options for employment were limited.

Drug selling provided an immediate means for gang members to earn money. Most were involved in selling to meet basic necessities and few dreamed of becoming highly successful drug lords. Somewhat consistent with subcultural theories, gang membership provided a structure for members to sell drugs in a way that maximizes profits and minimizes risks. The most important way that gangs do this is by selling as a group. Selling as a group offers many advantages. Pooling money allowed gang members to buy large quantities of drugs at a discount, increasing their profit margins. It also allowed gang members to start new members in drug selling or provided work opportunities for members in drug preparation.

Finally, selling as a group allowed gang members to set up an emergency fund to help members in need including bail. However, the advantages of group selling and gang membership carry social obligations of reciprocity. Members are expected to contribute to the gang with work and money. If members fail to do so, not only are they denied emergency assistance, they are also punished.

Not consistent with subcultural theories is the ambivalence that gang members expressed about selling drugs and the constraints and limits they placed on selling drugs to children. Selling drugs to neighbors and even family members was a rational choice in a context of disorganization. It was also seen by some gang members as the most moral choice. By selling to family members with substance use problems, gang members were able to keep resources within the family and help support younger siblings. They were also able to protect substance using family members from engaging in illegal and dangerous activities to procure drugs and from the exploitation of other drug dealers. In addition, drug selling was seen by gang members as the only immediately available opportunity to help economically struggling family members and neighbors. Drug selling also allowed gangs to provide for other less fortunate members of their neighborhoods. Actions such as buying gifts, providing food for the hungry or throwing parties for members of the neighborhood followed norms of reciprocity. By taking care of struggling neighbors, gang members ensured neighbors' goodwill so that they would be less likely to call police. However, the idea of protecting the neighborhood was also clearly a moral value for participants. Most emphasized their role in protecting their neighborhood from rival gangs.

Substance use also followed rules set by gang members. These rules are inconsistent in some ways from subcultural theories of gang membership. Hard drugs were not permitted because people who were addicted to these substances could become violent, inform on the gang to the police and would smoke up their profits. Many gang members had seen the negative effects of crack and heroin use on their family members and older gang members (OGs). Rather than serving as an example to follow, these experiences served as a warning of the dangers of drug use. Marijuana use was mostly seen as harmless, although a few members saw their use as problematic and getting in the way of achieving other goals.

Research that prioritizes gang members' perspectives on why they join gangs, and how they make decisions regarding selling drugs, maintaining their neighborhoods and controlling their own drug use can provide important insights that can be used to develop effective interventions. Since gang members value education and aspire to obtain legal employment, interventions to help adolescent gang members with the immediate financial pressures that lead them to sell drugs, such as conditional economic incentives for attending school, may be particularly effective. Conditional economic incentives (CEI) have been used in many health interventions to increase the short-term benefits of actions that are likely to have long term benefits, such as attending school for girls at risk of HIV infection in Malawi (Operario, Kuo, Sosa-Rubi, & Galarraga, 2013). Non-traditional school settings may be necessary for many gang members who have aged out of the public school system, been expelled, or are simply too academically behind to be able to graduate. Many gang members who dropped out wished to go back. They did not perceive any risk to themselves for dropping out of the gang to "better" themselves, much like Pyrooz' and Deckers' (2011)

findings that gang members were rarely subject to violence if they left for “pull” motives. CEI interventions may also help gang members reduce their substance use both directly, by paying gang members for drug-free urine screenings (Branson, Barbuti, Clemmey, Herman, & Bhutia, 2012; Stanger & Budney, 2010), and indirectly through encouraging participation in regular activities that are not conducive to substance use.

Importantly, CEI intervention of this sort actually responds to what gang members themselves say they would like to see in an intervention. Gang members’ own codes of conduct and prosocial norms may also be used to strengthen such an intervention approach. Most participants reported that they would rather have legitimate employment than sell drugs. In addition, most gang members reported feeling an obligation to help family members and other struggling members of their neighborhoods. Interventions that provide gang members with legitimate work experience, particularly in improving their neighborhoods may be well received. Most importantly, our results do not support the stereotype of gang members as antisocial. Rather, our results suggest that gang members are trying to make the best decisions they can in difficult life circumstances. They are deserving of compassion and a second chance.

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